

# Case Study

## Models for a Regenerative Economy: Social Environment Impacts in the Southeast

Athens Land Trust, Athens, Georgia, (Founded in 1994)

Prepared by Bailey Shea, Program Coordinator for Policy

### Overview<sup>1,2</sup>

*Service area:* 36 counties in Georgia

*Mission:* Conserve, empower and sustain communities through responsible and visionary land use.

Athens Land Trust (ALT) is a Community Land Trust founded in Athens, Georgia, in 1994 with the goal of developing rural and urban sustainable agriculture projects, conserving land and urban green spaces, and creating permanently affordable homes for low-income residents of the community. ALT's work spans several initiatives today, all of which are driven by a commitment to support the Athens community through a sustainable, full-circle approach.



In order – top, clockwise: - Barrow County, Georgia Conservation Easement - The Cottages at Cannontown, an EarthCraft Certified affordable housing development in Athens, Georgia - West Broad Community Garden in Athens, Georgia - One of the Young Urban Builders works on a home repair (Photo courtesy of Joshua L. Jones / Athens Banner-Herald) (Courtesy of Athens Land Trust)

### Natural Environment Impact

- *Land conservation:* ALT today helps support the permanent protection of more than 17,000 acres of land through conservation easements in 36 Georgia counties. This land includes portions of ten of Georgia's 14 major watersheds. ALT aims to protect ecologically rich areas and support landowners across the state in sustaining wildlife habitat, productive soils, and clean air and water. Conservation lands impact the natural environment in powerful ways that are critical for the realization of a regenerative economy. Protected watersheds, nutrient-rich soils, and carbon-sequestering forests provide powerful ecosystem services which are critical to restoring balance to the increasingly urbanized, developed and polluted city centers.

### Connection to Social Environment

- *Community agriculture:* With a mission to increase access to healthy food, support economic and entrepreneurial opportunities for underserved youth and adults, and promote sustainable agriculture, ALT is teaching Young Urban Farmers, local community gardeners and others about processes that produce healthy foods while maintaining the resources and fertility of the land. Today, ALT maintains and fosters a Community Garden Network in Athens with 12 active gardens and owns and operates two urban farms, which contribute to ALT's West Broad Farmers Market, which is located in the historically Black West Broad neighborhood operated by and for the surrounding communities. Community-level agriculture empowers communities by increasing access to healthy, affordable food and providing – literal or perceived – ownership of land and community space. Reducing reliance on mass market produce, creating local sources of nutrition at low cost, and empowering historically marginalized communities while maintaining the nutrients of the land – these are all examples of a local, community-built regenerative economy at work in the social environment.
- *Education:* After years of developing their conservation and housing work, Athens Land Trust began to realize traditional community development goals often aim to tick boxes -- how many houses built, how many apartment units, how many classes held, how many acres preserved – but can still fail to change the root of many issues communities face. ALT recognized a need for meaningful change within the community. At least one-third of their board is directly impacted by the organization's work, so residents of ALT homes, community gardeners and farmers market vendors sit on the board. It was through this community-centered board that ALT moved toward a structure that focused on community engagement and youth education in all its workstreams.

<sup>1</sup> <https://athenslandtrust.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Heather Benham and Tawana Mattox. December 7, 2020.

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- Today, Athens Land Trust runs three paid workforce development programs for Athens' youth. The Young Urban Farmers, Young Urban Builders and the Young Conservation Stewards programs incorporate on-site job training, leadership development and classroom education while exposing high-school aged youth to new opportunities. The opportunities for exposure for these students can be invaluable, and the ripple effects of educating young people in the community are great. Young people gain skills they can bring home – from filing tax paperwork and cooking produce to seeing firsthand the decision-making processes of large commercial developers and weatherizing older homes – these small changes can improve livelihoods for certain communities. But Executive Director Heather Benham doesn't like to say these impacts make communities more resilient. Athens' Black and underserved communities are and have been resilient she says. The land trust simply wants to make it easier for them to be resilient and bounce back in the face of challenges the system presents them.<sup>3</sup> Heather and Tawana Mattox, Director of Education and Empowerment describe the moment when students and community members "start to see the bigger game" and feel like they have the knowledge and the tools to advocate for change as a "win."
  - The Young Urban Farmers (YUF) program has served over 200 high school students to date. Participants learn transferable job skills at the West Broad Farmers Market, test business ideas through business planning projects, and learn about careers in sustainable agriculture through farm visits, field trips and guest speakers. Exposure to agriculture as a career opportunity and business enterprise, exposure to new foods and farming skills and understanding of entrepreneurship through food and farming expand opportunities for students far beyond what they could otherwise envision in a classroom or other traditional youth development program.
  - Young Urban Builders (YUB) began in 2018 as a program aimed at creating youth job opportunities and facilitating the rehabilitation, energy audits and weatherization of owner-occupied housing in the West Broad Neighborhood.<sup>4</sup> In 2019, the YUBs contributed to a project funded by a grant from the Southeast Sustainability Directors Network (SSDN). The program began with energy audits and careful and consistent engagement with the community. It soon became clear that many homes required much more intensive repairs in addition to weatherization. By the end of the pilot project, YUBs had learned how to complete energy audits using blower door testing, made significant repairs such as rebuilding flooring, made energy efficient improvements to houses, and gained community engagement experience.
  - Young Conservation Stewards (YCS) was created in partnership with the Northeast Georgia Invasive Plant Cooperative (NGIPC) and teaches young Athenians about the importance of land conservation and land management. Students join a fee-for-service team run by the NGIPC and learn plant identification, invasive plant removal, and native plant installation and maintenance while earning a living wage. In addition to these valuable land management skills, students learn valuable soft skills, are exposed to opportunities associated with land management and conservation and make new connections.
- Each of these programs invests in the Athens community through youth. The economic opportunities these young people gain and access for years afterward are remarkable, and the knowledge gained and spread through them is a long-term investment in the social fabric of the Athens community.

### Connection to the Built Environment

- *Affordable housing:* Through its ownership of land in Athens, ALT is able to build and provide homes to local families. ALT sells a house to a family or individual and the homebuyer has a 99-year renewable ground lease for the land, which ALT retains ownership of. While the homeowner maintains full use of the land like any other homeowner, this arrangement significantly reduces cost to the homebuyer and makes it more attainable. The land trust has also developed affordable housing rental properties on its land throughout the county. ALT supported 49 families in becoming first-time homeowners, 16 families in lease-purchasing homes, and 376 families in affordable apartments built by ALT. Athens Land Trust has skillfully integrated quality, healthy built environments into its commitments to land conservation, increased food access and community development. This balance demonstrates the interconnectedness of the three components of a regenerative economy.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Heather Benham and Tawana Mattox. December 7, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2020-07-22/saving-homes-for-a-sustainable-future-in-athens-georgia>